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SUBJECT: NATO REINTEGRATION BECOMES PARLIAMENTARY POLITICAL FOOTBALL

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Kathleen Allegrone for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C/NF) Summary. In a March 6 meeting, Jacques Audibert, Director of Strategic Affairs at the MFA, was optimistic that the French national debate on whether to fully participate in the integrated military command would soon be complete. PM Fillon has notified parliament that the debate on NATO, currently scheduled for March 17, would be followed by a vote of confidence in the foreign policy of the government, of which NATO reintegration is but one element. Government and parliamentary contacts are confident that the vote will succeed, as conservative deputies hostile to NATO reintegration are unlikely to join the left to bring down the Fillon government over the issue. Any official announcement will be made after the debate is completed. The GOF expects to "announce" its decision by letter from President Sarkozy to the NATO SYG and permanent representatives, after which Paris hopes that the move will be welcomed by the NAC in advance of the NATO summit. The NAC could then task the relevant committees to implement the decision. To date, no Turkish officials have raised with France any procedural or other concerns related to the reintegration process. On the domestic front, despite carefully orchestrated moves to ensure a successful vote in Parliament, the subject of NATO reintegration remains at the heart of a fiery political debate. End summary.

¶2. (C/NF) Audibert informed Pol M/C on March 6 that the political rollout of the national decision to rejoin NATO should soon be complete with the final debate and vote in Parliament on March 17. First, however, President Sarkozy is expected to address a security conference on March 11, in which he would "go further" than he did at Munich, but still refrain from making any official announcement until the parliamentary debate is concluded. On March 17, PM Fillon will lead the debate, accompanied by FM Kouchner and DefMin Morin. In PM Fillon's letter announcing the debate, the Prime Minister observed that NATO reintegration is but one element in France's overall foreign policy. Therefore, the debate and the vote in the assembly will be to approve or reject France's general foreign policy direction. Audibert did not anticipate any problems with the debate or vote, saying that those against the move reflect the outdated "sovereignist" thinking that also characterizes opposition to the European Union. He did note that some Socialist Party politicians were threatening to withdraw France from NATO when they return to power, if the decision is taken now to reintegrate. (Embassy note: Although the debate will include both houses of parliament, the vote of confidence is the sole purview of the National Assembly. This effectively excludes the possibility that President Sarkozy could use the occasion to address both houses of parliament, a power only recently granted to the executive in the 2008 constitutional reforms. End note.)

¶3. (C/NF) Audibert expected that after the debate, President Sarkozy would make an official announcement of the French decision to reintegrate into NATO by letters addressed to the NATO SYG and the permanent representatives at NATO. In return, Paris hoped that the NAC would "welcome" the decision and then task the relevant NATO committees to implement the decision. Ideally, the GOF wants the current NAC to take the action to welcome the French re-entry, so that it is complete by the NATO summit where the decision can again be welcomed officially. Audibert, who was with the French Foreign Minister in Brussels on March 5, confirmed that the Turks made no attempt to meet or raise questions about procedures to be followed, but he noted that, if there are questions, it would be most appropriate to raise them within the NATO committees tasked with implementation.

¶4. (SBU) Our parliamentary contacts have also assured us that the math on the confidence vote is highly in the government's favor. The NATO debate will fall under the constitutional provision that gives the National Assembly the right to vote on the government's general policy direction and which only requires a majority of votes cast. An actual vote of confidence linked to specific legislation would require the government to meet the higher bar of an absolute majority of the total representatives in the Assembly -- or 289 votes. Therefore, on March 17, even if some fringe conservatives from the governing UMP party do abstain (as some contacts predicted they would), the Socialist Party and other opponents will have a difficult time mustering sufficient votes to force a dissolution of the government.

¶5. (C/NF) Comment: In general, French officials at this time remain highly focused on the domestic debate and French

national decision process, with little apparent concern for the mechanics of implementation once action is transferred to NATO. Interestingly, Audibert cited the recent case of Lithuanian opposition to resuming the NATO-Russia Council as being a "good example" for opponents to reintegration, since it demonstrated that all NATO members have a voice and full integration does not necessarily equate to "loss of sovereignty" as many claim. Despite Audibert's assurances that he doesn't expect any major problems with the March 17 domestic debate and vote on NATO reintegration, post notes that President Sarkozy is still facing increasingly fiery political opposition on this subject. With the president sinking in the polls, opponents see an opportunity to score political points on an issue that has heavy symbolism in terms of French sovereignty and national identity. Nonetheless, a March 4 Ifop poll shows the NATO debate has failed to capture popular imagination. Some 14 percent of French people said they had discussed NATO reintegration in the past week, behind the Oscars (20 percent) and the annual national agricultural fair (50 percent). End comment.

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